

Does Diversity Make a



Difference?

**Three Research Studies on
Diversity in College Classrooms**

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

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Why Racial and Ethnic Diversity Matters

The dramatic transformation in the composition of the student population of America's colleges and universities over the past generation is unparalleled in the history of Western higher education institutions. In the early 1960s, with the exception of those attending historically black colleges and universities, only a relative handful of Americans of color went to college in the United States; today, upwards of one in five undergraduates at four-year schools is a minority. That this revolution has led the way to the social and economic integration of millions of minority individuals into the mainstream of American life is remarkable, if unsurprising, because in the past 30 years, a college education has become almost prerequisite to advancement in our society. Equally remarkable, though less often recognized, are the contributions these individuals make not only to American social, economic, and cultural vitality, but also to the academic, intellectual, and educational vigor of the college and university communities of which they are members. Nevertheless, the nation's march to full equality of educational opportunity for all its citizens is not over.

To increase access and expand the institutional diversity that results in enhanced social and educational outcomes, many higher education institutions have long engaged in such activities as the recruitment of underrepresented students, high school mentoring and tutorial programs, articulation agreements with community colleges, need-based financial aid awards, and race-sensitive admissions policies. Tools such as these are indispensable to achieving a diverse campus environment.

Taking race and ethnic origin into account in admissions decisions is one of the most controversial of these practices. Race-sensitive admissions were recognized and affirmed in Justice Powell's opinion in the 1978 Supreme Court decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, but subsequent federal court decisions, popular referenda, and institutional policies responding to these recent mandates are forcing some colleges and universities—and threatening to force many others—to abandon race-sensitive admissions policies and to limit the educational value all students derive from learning in a diverse environment.

The strong empirical evidence presented in this monograph, comprising three studies of college teachers' and students' attitudes toward and experiences with

racial and ethnic diversity, demonstrate that campus diversity represents an educational benefit for all students—minority and white alike—that cannot be duplicated in a racially and ethnically homogeneous academic setting. The studies presented here strongly support the proposition that practices such as race-sensitive admissions lead to expanded educational possibilities and better educational outcomes for *all* students, regardless of race or ethnic origin.

What the Research Shows

The findings outlined below are based on (1) analyses of data from more than 570 faculty members (out of a random sample of 1,210) using the Faculty Classroom Diversity Questionnaire, the first comprehensive survey ever conducted of the attitudes toward and experiences with racial and ethnic diversity of faculty members at America’s leading research universities; (2) analyses of data from a similar survey of 81 faculty members at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota; and (3) an in-depth, qualitative, multiple case study of three interactive, multi-racial/multi-ethnic classrooms at the University of Maryland, College Park.

- **Upwards of two-thirds of faculty members surveyed believe that their universities value racial and ethnic diversity.**

In assessing how important student diversity is to their university’s mission, 69 percent of faculty respondents to the Faculty Classroom Diversity Questionnaire rated having a diverse student body either 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 (“not important/irrelevant”) to 5 (“extremely important”). Similarly, 70 percent of respondents agreed strongly that their university is committed to enhancing the climate for all students, and 75 percent agreed strongly that their university values extra-curricular activities that promote cultural awareness. In all instances, fewer than 13 percent of faculty members said that these values are of little or no importance to their institutions.

- **More than 90 percent of faculty members indicated that neither the quality of students nor the intellectual substance of class discussion suffers from diversity.**

Only 9 percent of faculty respondents agreed strongly or agreed somewhat with the statement that their institution’s focus on diversity had lowered the quality of their students, and just 6 percent agreed strongly or somewhat that diversity had lowered the quality of their institution. Barely 2 percent said that diversity in the classroom impeded discussion of substantive issues.

- **Faculty members said that diversity helps all students achieve the essential goals of a college education, that positive benefits accrue from diversity in the classroom, and that white students experience no adverse effects from classroom diversity.**

More than two-thirds of faculty respondents said that students benefit from learning in a racially and ethnically diverse environment, both with respect to exposure to new perspectives and in terms of willingness to examine their own personal perspectives. More than 40 percent of faculty members also said that diversity provides interactions important for developing critical thinking and leadership skills. A great many faculty members said that diversity reshapes the issues white students consider, alters the way in which they read class material, influences the subjects they choose for research and class projects, and affects how they collaborate in class. Fewer than 5 percent of faculty members believe that racial and ethnic diversity in classes had any adverse effect on white students.

- **The vast majority of faculty members reported that student diversity did not lead them to make significant changes in their classroom practices.**

Slightly less than one-third of faculty respondents said that the presence of racially diverse students led them to adjust their course syllabus, and approximately one-quarter of them said that they changed their teaching methods to encourage discussion in their classes. Only about 20 percent of teachers reported developing new courses in response to a diverse student population, and roughly the same percentage reported reexamining the criteria they used for evaluating students. In other words, most faculty members do not lower their standards, change their grading patterns, or adjust course content in response to a more racially diverse student population.

- **Faculty members reported being well-prepared to teach diverse classes and feeling comfortable doing so, yet only about one-third of them raise issues of diversity or create diverse work groups.**

When asked to evaluate their level of comfort in teaching racially and ethnically diverse classes, 86 percent of faculty members responded 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 (“not comfortable”) to 5 (“very comfortable”). Similarly, 71 percent indicated that they felt well-prepared to teach in such a setting. Far fewer respondents said they initiate discussions of race in class (36 percent) or assign students to diverse groups (33 percent), reflecting the finding that most faculty do not alter their teaching methods or course content for multi-racial/multi-ethnic classes.

- **Women faculty members, more politically liberal faculty members, and faculty members of color have more positive views of the benefits of diversity than survey respondents as a whole, while full professors and faculty with more years of teaching have less positive views of the benefits of diversity than respondents generally.**

Although women faculty members, politically liberal faculty members, and faculty members of color value the benefits of diversity to classrooms, students, teaching, and research more highly; feel better prepared to deal with diversity; and say they are more likely to address issues of diversity in their classrooms, they perceive the climate for diversity as less positive than do survey respondents as a whole. Another consistent pattern that emerged was that more senior faculty (in terms of years and rank) were somewhat less positive about the value of diversity and less likely to address issues of diversity than were respondents generally. Similarly, faculty members who reported spending more time lecturing cited more negative effects of diversity and were less positive about the benefits of diversity, while faculty members who spent more class time in whole class activities saw fewer negative and more positive effects of diversity. Overall, faculty views about ethnic and racial diversity were strongly tied to their views about other types of diversity. That is, attitudes about the value of ethnic and racial diversity were related to a faculty member's more general beliefs about the importance of colleges being places where diverse perspectives are brought together.

- **Each of America's top liberal arts colleges has as its core mission a range of developmental outcomes that focus on intellectual purposes in the service of social, personal, and ethical goals. Tolerance and diversity are central to the missions of well over half of these colleges.**

The official mission statements and supporting documents of the 28 top liberal arts colleges in the country (as ranked by *U.S. News and World Report*) all list a range of essential aspirations that include but go well beyond intellectual mastery. Six values were cited by more than half of the colleges analyzed: the acquisition of intellectual mastery and rigor; learning to value service to community; developing self-knowledge and growing personally; learning perspectives from diversity; developing and nurturing a liberated, creative mind; and gaining an increased capacity for tolerance, respect, and concern for others. Of these, "learning perspectives from diversity" commands the attention of over 60 percent of the schools. In addition, 57 percent include "tolerance and respect for others" as part of their mission statements and/or supporting documents.

- **Fully 92 percent of Macalester College’s faculty respondents said that having a racially or ethnically diverse student body is essential or very important to achieving the college’s mission, while close to 90 percent disagreed with the view that an emphasis on racial and ethnic diversity has lowered the quality of the institution or the student body.**

Macalester College is an example of a liberal arts college with a long history of a commitment to diversity. Macalester survey respondents overwhelmingly cited diversity as an important tool in fulfilling the college’s mission and reported a variety of positive educational benefits for all students. The majority of faculty members with experience teaching in racially and ethnically diverse classes reported the following classroom benefits: (a) students become more willing to examine their perspectives and values; (b) students are introduced to more issues and perspectives; (c) students are exposed to ideas and points of view that they disagree with or do not understand; (d) students’ stereotypes about important issues in academic disciplines are more often confronted; and (e) students’ social and political stereotypes are more often confronted.

- **Almost all Macalester survey respondents believe that a racially and ethnically diverse student body enhances the educational experience of all students.**

A remarkable 97 percent of the respondents either agreed strongly (64 percent) or agreed somewhat (33 percent) that diversity enhances learning; only three faculty members disagreed somewhat, and none disagreed strongly. This strong endorsement for the educational value of diversity means that even faculty members who do not wholeheartedly endorse some of the practices used to create a diverse environment, or who are not fully committed to the importance of learning about race and ethnicity, believe nevertheless that a diverse learning environment enhances students’ educational experience.

- **Forty percent of Macalester’s classes had no African-American or Latino students in the semester in which the survey was administered, and U.S. students of color were the sole member of their racial or ethnic group in two-thirds of their classes.**

For the past eight years, U.S. students of color have made up an average 13.4 percent of Macalaster’s total enrollment, higher than the 7.7 percent average at Carnegie I and II liberal arts colleges. Despite the institution’s relatively high proportion of students of color, in spring 1998 all 353 classes of more than five students at Macalester included white students, while 40 percent of classes had no U.S. student of color from an underrepresented group (African American,

Latino, and Native American) enrolled. African-American students and Latino students were the only member of their racial or ethnic group in approximately two-thirds of their classes. Of course, students do not randomly distribute themselves across course offerings, so certain classes at Macalester have robust “critical masses” of students of color. For example, six academic departments had two or more African-American students in at least 25 percent of their classes. However, 25 other academic programs had two or more African-American students in fewer than 25 percent of their classes. A similar distributional phenomenon is characteristic of classes of 15 to 25 students at all colleges and universities with minority populations of less than about 15 percent.

- **Racial and ethnic diversity in the classroom is necessary, but not sufficient in and of itself, for creating the most effective educational environment.**

Faculty participants in the University of Maryland case studies said that a multi-racial/multi-ethnic classroom enabled them to implement their teaching methods more successfully, to better achieve their learning goals for students, and to enhance the curriculum with a wider range of experiences than more homogeneous classrooms permitted. But both student and faculty participants said that other conditions are essential to maximizing the potential benefits and minimizing the potential drawbacks of racially and ethnically diverse classrooms. These include (1) a learning-centered rather than teaching-centered philosophy, in which the faculty member is considered only one of the classroom participants; (2) interactive teaching techniques, such as small group discussions, student presentations, debates, role playing, problem posing, and student paper exchanges; and (3) a supportive, inclusive classroom climate. Ultimately, faculty participants said, being a reflective teacher who utilizes classroom diversity is critical to enhancing the outcomes of a multi-racial/multi-ethnic classroom.

- **Racial and ethnic diversity increases the educational possibilities of the classroom.**

Both faculty members and students in the University of Maryland case studies said that the broader range of ideas, authorities, and perspectives racially and ethnically diverse students bring to bear on course subject matter generates more complex thinking among all students.

Although faculty and students admitted that conflict and tension sometimes arise in multi-racial/multi-ethnic classrooms, students said such experiences are educational in themselves, and teachers said they are useful educational tools. Students also said that classroom diversity is important even in disciplines like

math, science, and accounting because biases can be challenged and exposed. At the same time, however, faculty and students emphasized that learning does not take place only in multi-racial/multi-ethnic classrooms; rather, the absence of diversity from a classroom results in diminished educational opportunity.

■ **Multi-racial/multi-ethnic classrooms enhance educational outcomes.**

Student and faculty participants agreed that learning in a multi-racial/multi-ethnic classroom has a positive effect on students' cognitive and personal development because it challenges stereotypes, broadens perspectives, and sharpens critical thinking skills. Faculty participants said they need diversity to teach to their highest potential and that having multi-racial/multi-ethnic classrooms allows them to be more successful in helping their classes achieve the educational outcomes they envision. Students compared their experiences of learning and self-development in interactive, multi-racial/multi-ethnic classrooms at the University of Maryland with such experiences in non-integrated environments by saying not only that they learned more about others and acquired broader perspectives on issues in diverse classes, but also that they learned more about themselves. Exposure to others' experiences and viewpoints made students more aware of their own opinions and biases.

Where the Evidence Points

The empirical evidence from the three studies presented in this monograph makes it clear that barring colleges and universities from access to a diverse student population denies them an important educational tool for preparing students for their own futures and for the future of our society. The data demonstrate that there are strong educational reasons for universities to recruit and admit a diverse student population.

Faculty members at the nation's top higher education research institutions and at one of the leading liberal arts colleges in the country—the expert practitioners of the college teaching profession—value diversity on their campuses and in their classrooms, regardless of their educational philosophies. The vast majority say that diversity has not diminished the quality of their institutions or their students, does not disserve white students, generates powerful educational benefits for all students, and helps achieve many of the key objectives of a college education. Many faculty members make use of student diversity to enhance the learning process and to enrich their classes. Professors who recognize and use diversity as an educational tool, who include content related to diversity in their courses, who employ active learning methods, and who create an inclusive, supportive classroom climate can and do produce better educational outcomes in racially heterogeneous classes than in homogeneous classes.

American colleges and universities articulate goals and aspirations related to their underlying values. Most have a range of educational objectives—including academic excellence; learning diverse perspectives from people of diverse races, ethnicities, and cultures; commitment to community; and personal and moral growth—that can be realized only with diverse student populations. A lack of diversity drastically limits the educational opportunities available at colleges and universities and gravely compromises institutions' capacity to fulfill their missions.

If institutions and their faculties are to be true to their own commitment to providing the best education they can, they must have the authority to establish policies and implement practices that will attract students who will contribute to the shared values of the academic community and who collectively will create an environment conducive to accomplishing the institutions' missions. Unfortunately, the affirma-

tive action debate has deflected public discourse away from consideration of the range of qualities that make individuals potentially valued participants in a learning community. The controversy has portrayed race-sensitive admissions policies and other programs to create diverse campus environments as antithetical to academic quality, when the evidence in fact supports Justice Powell's assertion in *Bakke* that racial and ethnic diversity contribute to the "robust exchange of ideas" that characterizes intellectual excellence on college campuses. Finally, the discussion has ignored the educational value of a diverse learning environment to all students—a value to which the findings set forth in this volume attest. The time has come to return the focus of the debate to where it ought to be: how to provide a high-quality college education to all Americans.

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